

Ocean Conservation Work Group

2024 Work Plan

Work Group Resources:

- [Ocean Conservation Work Group webpage](#)
- [Ocean Conservation Work Group roster](#)

Work Group Leads:

State co-lead: Kevin Hassell - New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection

Federal or Tribal co-lead: TBD

Regional support: Jes Watts, Mid-Atlantic Regional Council on the Ocean (MARCO)

Work Group Members: Work Group membership is open to government and non-governmental entities operating in the 5 Mid-Atlantic states and the District of Columbia that are willing to participate in the activities of the work group. Members are expected to contribute on monthly work group calls and assist with implementation of projects.

Current Members Include:

| First Name | Last Name | Organization |
|------------|------------|--|
| Greg | Atkin | National Aquarium |
| Isabella | Betancourt | New York Department of State (NYDOS) |
| Avalon | Bristow | Mid-Atlantic Regional Council on the Ocean (MARCO) |
| Merry | Camhi | Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) |
| Noah | Chesnin | Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) |
| Ryan | Green | Virginia Coastal Zone Management (VA CZM) |
| Brent | Greenfield | National Ocean Policy Coalition |
| Terra | Haight | New York Department of State (NYDOS) |
| Deena | Hansen | Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Marine Minerals Program |
| Devon | Haines | New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) |
| Kevin | Hassel | New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) |
| LeAnn | Hogan | National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) |
| Alexandria | Horan | New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) |
| Kristi | Lieske | Delaware DNREC |

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| Tony | MacDonald | OPC; Monmouth University UCI |
| Laura | McKay | Ocean Conservationist |
| Jay | Odell | MARCO Fisheries; Monmouth University UCI |
| Paul | Ticco | New York Department of State (NYDOS) |
| Karl | Vilacoba | MARCO Data Portal; Monmouth University UCI |
| Jes | Watts | Mid-Atlantic Regional Council on the Ocean (MARCO) |

Description:

The careful stewardship and protection of the Mid-Atlantic’s marine environments and resources safeguards the region’s ecological and economic well-being. Stretching from New York to Virginia, this region boasts a vast and diverse coastline that is home to important marine ecosystems, productive fisheries, and vibrant coastal communities.

The Ocean Conservation Work Group priorities align with the Mid-Atlantic Regional Ocean Action Plan’s (OAP) Healthy Ocean Ecosystem Framework Goal, to “promote ocean ecosystem health, functionality, and integrity through conservation, protection, enhancement, and restoration”.¹ Specific goals for this work group include:

- Build on Healthy Ocean Ecosystem Actions 1, 2 and 6 of the 2016 Mid-Atlantic Ocean Action Plan:
 - OAP Action 1: Identify ecologically rich areas of the ocean in the Mid-Atlantic region and increase understanding of those areas to foster more informed decision making. (p. 40)
 - OAP Action 2: Map shifts in ocean species and habitats. (p. 41)
 - OAP Action 6: Incorporate Traditional Knowledge of Tribes regarding ocean health in regional ocean planning in the Mid-Atlantic. (p.44)
- Develop a comprehensive understanding of the intersection between conservation efforts and evolving oceanic conditions, including climate change, shifts in species distribution, and the emergence of new uses such as aquaculture and wind energy, with a focus on the Mid-Atlantic Ocean region.

¹(2016). Mid-Atlantic Regional Ocean Action Plan. In *Bureau of Ocean Energy Management* (p. 26). <https://www.boem.gov/sites/default/files/environmental-stewardship/Mid-Atlantic-Regional-Planning-Body/Mid-Atlantic-Regional-Ocean-Action-Plan.pdf>

Activity 1: Plan, organize, and host quarterly informational webinars and roundtable dialogues to discuss ocean usage interests of the Mid-Atlantic region.

Description:

The Work Group will host an annual webinar series that explores the Mid-Atlantic's unique challenges and opportunities related to protecting coastal and ocean ecosystems. These webinars will foster awareness of ongoing and planned conservation strategies, and highlight opportunities for collaboration. The Work Group will ensure coordination with other relevant regional communication efforts where appropriate.

Timeline: December 2023 - November 2024

- February
- August/September
- November/December

Project Outcomes:

- An annual series of webinars and/or dialogues covering topics related to ocean conservation, which could be used for information sharing, informing regional ocean planning, and engaging stakeholders.
- Increased understanding of ongoing and emerging ocean conservation research and initiatives in the region.
- New or bolstered connections with governmental, non-governmental, and academic partners.

Activity 2: Plan and host an Ocean Conservation Symposium.

Description:

The Ocean Conservation Symposium ("Symposium") will provide a platform for the exchange of knowledge, best practices, and innovative solutions in the field of ocean conservation and the sustainable management of marine resources. This event will bring together Mid-Atlantic regional entities working on ocean conservation to discuss current and emerging ocean conservation fields, highlight solutions, and identify opportunities to incorporate diversity, equity and inclusion into ocean conservation efforts. The Symposium will be planned in close partnership with the Mid-Atlantic Ocean Planning Committee (Mid-A OPC) to ensure collaboration between all five Mid-Atlantic coastal states, relevant Federal agencies, and Tribes.

Timeline: December 2023 - November 2024

- MARCO staff planning: December 2023 - February 2024
- OC Symposium planning: February 2024 - September 2024
- Symposium: October 1 - 3, 2024 (New Jersey)

Project Outcomes:

- In-person meetings that build a shared understanding of progress, needs, and next-steps for ocean conservation efforts in the Mid-Atlantic, and that provide an opportunity to set clear goals for the future.
- Strengthened regional collaboration around ocean conservation in the Mid-Atlantic.

Activity 3: Utilize the Mid-Atlantic Data Portal to visualize and quantify shifting species, habitats, and current and proposed conservation measures in the Mid-Atlantic Ocean.

Description:

The Work Group will leverage information (including but not limited to the MDAT species density layers) on the Mid-Atlantic Ocean Data Portal (“Portal”) to build an understanding of the intersection between conservation efforts and evolving oceanic conditions, including climate change, within the area. This work is being done with support from the Duke University Marine Geospatial Ecology Lab (MGEL) through its work with both MARCO and NROC in incorporating marine life models into both the [Mid-Atlantic](#) and [Northeast](#) Ocean Data Portals.

Activity 3.1 This project is a continuation of the MDAT effort, and will bring marine life data products up to date and in alignment with new and emerging uses of the data products, many of which involve explicit assessments of change and evaluation of stressor impacts, which requires careful and robust data product development and revision. Primarily, MGEL will build on current work investigating and prototyping the feasibility for creating products that illustrate change over time. MARCO has worked in recent years with MDAT to assess categories of change, including data availability, method assessment, and visualization outputs. Similarly, MARCO will contract with MGEL to inform and develop visualization tools that show density distribution models for a given species at different spatio-temporal scales. This work will provide documentation, guidance, or hybrid products to help decision-makers interpret and apply different products when more than one spatial product is available for a given area in space and time. The Portal’s Conservation theme will continue to be maintained and expanded to offer users a comprehensive view of current and proposed conservation measures applying to marine and coastal areas in the Mid-Atlantic.

Timeline: December 2023 - November 2025

Outcomes:

- Improved information on regional climate change impacts on species and habitat distribution.
- Maintain and expand data offerings in the Portal’s Conservation theme.
- Ocean Story on the Mid-Atlantic Ocean Data Portal highlighting how the Portal has been used in climate planning.
- Updated intermediate data products upon request, such as presence/absence layers, with guidance from MARCO, NROC, and RWSC.
- New summary products to match the development of new species groups across taxa. For example, it is anticipated that the Atlantic Marine Bird Cooperative (AMBC) will update the Marine Bird Species Priority List for species of concern sometime within the project time period, as well as the potential for new or updated groups of seabird species sensitive to offshore energy development (collision or avoidance risk).
- Updated North Atlantic right whale model service and evaluated how best to update the appropriate species group summary products.

Activity 4: Community Engagement & Outreach

Description: The Work Group will create materials and opportunities to enhance community engagement and outreach.

Activity 4.1: The Work Group will foster partnerships with Aquarium Conservation teams across the Mid-Atlantic to identify opportunities for regional community engagement efforts, and spatial data visualization.

Activity 4.2: Develop and implement comprehensive training sessions on the Mid-Atlantic Ocean Data Portal for stakeholders with interests in conservation topics or at conservation-themed events. These sessions will provide stakeholders with skills to navigate the Portal, interpret data, and apply it to decision-making processes. The training will be tailored to stakeholders' roles and interests, ensuring they understand how the Portal supports informed decisions and collaborative ocean conservation efforts in the region. Solicit feedback to ensure the training meets stakeholders' needs, enabling them to effectively contribute to marine management and conservation initiatives throughout the year. Continue to develop ocean wildlife or ocean conservation story maps and educational materials for the Portal.

Project Timeline: Planning and Development phase in 2024

Activity 5: Explore Shellfish and Submerged Aquatic Vegetation (SAV) Aquaculture as an ocean conservation tool **(NEW)**

Description:

The Ocean Conservation Work Group will explore the use of aquaculture in the Mid-Atlantic to advance conservation goals. There are already several examples of Indigenous communities in the Mid-Atlantic doing just that:

- [Kelp farming, Shinnecock Nation](#)
- [Oyster restoration program, Nansemond Indian Nation](#)

There is opportunity for MARCO to highlight best practices for aquaculture conservation in the Mid-Atlantic, build awareness of the potential for aquaculture to contribute to a sustainable ocean economy, and build capacity to continue ongoing efforts.

Timeline: December 2023 - November 2024

- Planning and Development Phase:
 - Come to consensus as a Work Group on facets of aquaculture conservation that would benefit from an articulation of regional best practices, and get approval from MARCO states.
 - Work with OMDT to identify spatial product(s) to be incorporated into the 2025 Portal Work Plan.
 - Develop a framework for an aquaculture conservation workforce development program for seagrass cultivation.
- Ocean Conservation Symposium session:
 - Indigenous aquaculture in the Mid-Atlantic & contributions to conservation goals
 - How does aquaculture help build resilient communities & contribute to a sustainable ocean economy?

Project Outcomes:

- Potential topics to explore:
 - How does aquaculture help build resilient communities?

- What are best management practices for shellfish and algae aquaculture
- Seagrass/marine algae cultivation
- Increase in living shoreline usage over shoreline hardening has increased demand for SAV, but the supply is severely limited
- Opportunities for inter-state resource sharing and for workforce development
 - SAV cultivation (ties in with sustainable ocean economies strategy)
 - Potential to collaborate with [NOAA VetCorps](#) program
 - Potential to build off work underway at VIMS
 - Overlaps between the Ocean Conservation work group and the Carbon Storage Collaboration
- Aquaculture siting
 - Overlaps with Ocean Planning and Data Portal (spatial component)

